DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 038 395 TE 001 717

AUTHOR Harrison, John
TITLE The Appreciation of Literature.
INSTITUTION Alberta Teachers Association, Edmonton.
PUB DATE 69
NOTE 5p.
JOURNAL CIT Alberta English '69; v9 n2 p27-31 Fall 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Analytical Criticism, Content Analysis, Critical Reading, *English Instruction, Imagery, *Literary Analysis, Literary Conventions, Literary Criticism, *Literary Discrimination, Literature, *Literature Appreciation, Metaphors, *Poetry, Secondary Education

ABSTRACT

The problem, emphasized by I. A. Richards, of cultivating in students an awareness of literature which enables them to discern good and bad writing remains unsolved. As demonstrated in critical essays about a poem written under examination conditions by two 16-year-old boys, an ability to identify poetic techniques is not enough to ensure proper literary discrimination. Students also need to consider the complexity, economy, and "truth" of the expression. They should be led to appraise literature, specifically poetry, as significant communication which speaks to our condition as men and as individuals. [Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document.] (JM)

Alberta English '69; Vol. 9, No. 2, Fall 1969

FALL 1969

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

The Appreciation of Literature

JOHN HARRISON

ED038395

The editors would like to believe that the essays quoted by Dr. Harrison do not fairly reflect the critical abilities of high school students – but wishing won't make it so. Secondary and university teachers are invited to duplicate his procedure with their students, and report – with quotations – the results to the editors for future publication. Deadline for the next issue is December 1.

I

The problem that I.A. Richards has perhaps done more than anyone else to highlight in our time is still with us. It is the problem of cultivating in our students sensibilities of literary appreciation that can effectively discriminate between good and bad writing. Our failure in this respect as teachers takes one of three main forms. The first is that we totally fail to communicate with certain of our students in literature classes, with the result that they move from a potentially promising orientation towards literature to a detestation of it or to a neutral ignoring of it. Or we fail to strike up an interest in literary values at all, so that in this case there can be no recession from interest. Or finally we teach them the limited range of skills required to identify prosodic and tropic linguistic features, rhythmical and metrical features, genre, imagery, methods of characterisation and so on: we teach them this, but fail more or less utterly to cultivate just appreciation.

TO UNC

I want to deal briefly here only with our third example of failure, and will give two instances of it before further comment. A number of sixteen-year-old boys under examination conditions were asked to write a "critical appreciation" of a poem they had not seen before. The poem is given below, followed by the essays of two of the boys picked at random. The time allowed was forty minutes; I have transcribed the scripts without change. The group was not given the poet's name, so it is irrelevant to us.

The Last Chrysanthemum

Why should this flower delay so long
To show its tremulous plumes?
Now is the time of plaintive robin-song
When flowers are in their tombs.

Through the slow summer, when the sun
Called to each frond and whorl
That all he could for clowers was being done,
Why did it not uncurl?

It must have felt that fervid call
Although it took no heed,
Waking but now, when leaves like corpses fall,
And saps all retrocede.

Too late its beauty, lonely thing,
The seaon's shine is spent,
Nothing remains for it but shivering
In tempests turbulent.

Had it a reason for delay,
Dreaming in witlessness
That for a bloom so delicately gay
Winter would stay its stress?

I talk as if the thing were born
With sense to work its mind;
Yet it is but one mask of many worn
By the Great Face behind.

SCRIPT I

This poem uses a fair deal of imagery and repetition to make its point. Much of what it says is already expressed somewhere else in the poem, in only a slightly differing form. A certain amount of circumlocution is also used in places, merely expressing the fact that it is winter. For instance,

---

John Harrison is Associate Professor in the Department of Education at Sir George Williams University in Montreal.

'Now is the time of plaintive robin-song, When flowers are in their tombs,' is making exactly the same point as does 'when leaves like corpses fall, And saps all retrocede 'two stanzas further on.

A lot of alliteration is used here for effect, as in 'the slow summer, when the sun' or 'The seasons shine is spent', or 'tempests turbulent.' Metaphors and similes are also present, as in 'when the sun called to each frond and whorl,' or 'when leaves like corpses fall.' Throughout this work, in fact, a great deal of imagery and circumlocution is used, in order to avoid saying things directly, to avoid expressing basic realities, to present a 'refined' picture to the reader. Of course, this desire to paint such a picture leads to a compensatorily wide use of methods of heightening the poetic effect.

This is helped here by the personification of the flower, dreaming, waking and shivering, and by such images as that of the sun calling to the plant, in order to make it uncurl. The vocabulary also plays its part; the sun, for instance, calls 'fervidly', and saps all 'retrocede.' The flower has 'tremulous plumes,' and it is 'dreaming in witlessness.' This last paradoxical statement is very effective indeed, and is aided by the fact that witlessness can have more than one meaning; it could simply mean that the flower was unaware that it was dreaming, or it could mean that the flower had no consciousness, no mind, and therefore could not realise that it was dreaming.

The verse-form also draws attention to itself; the longer third line, followed by another short line, again has its effect, as, for instance, in the final stanza; 'Yet it is but one mask of many worn By the Great Face behind.' The fact that the stress falls on 'Great' rather than 'the', on which one would expect it to fall, makes the phrase 'Great Face' more noticeable, emphasizing the fact that the chrysanthemum is just another of the wonders of God.

The poem uses a fairly simple vocabulary throughout, although expressing ideas, questions, which are not altogether simple. It mixes characteristics of different types of poetry, such as Augustan and Metaphysical; it is very effective, in that after a great deal of question, and, at times repetition, the answer is given in merely one stanza.

SCRIPT II

This is a poem in which the writer examines the strangeness of nature, and the inexplicable peculiarity of some of God's wishes. He does this by writing about a flower which is late in blooming, and whose normal beauty is unable to withstand the harshness of winter. It is also brought out that winter is a season of death, and the flower is the only living thing. But why is it still living, in the face of all opposition, when it is obvious that it must die? These are the questions put forward and examined by the poet in this piece.

The poet uses imagery mainly to convey the complete and utter feeling of death which winter contains for him. He discovers the flowers as being in their "tombs", and their leaves like "corpses" falling. This harping on the death of flowers, makes the juxtaposition of them with the living extremely effective, since the life of the flower seems so out of place in the desolate winter atmosphere which pervades the poem.

Besides the use of imagery, there is also a great amount of alliteration to bring out the feelings which the different seasons evoke in the author. He describes the scene as the "slow summer when the sun/ called . . ." The repetition of the letter gives a sleepy, dreamlike effect. Later on he says that the flower "must have felt that fervid call/Although it took no heed." The first line gives an impression of anxiety and speed, whereas the second line, having no stress, is made to sound plaintive, as though there were a feeling of hopelessness at the flower not having obeyed the rays of the sun. The use of the alliteration and stress with the words "felt", and "fervid", gives a startling feeling of the urgency and power of the call, making the failure to respond of the flower even more effective.

The use of alliteration to cause stress can also be seen when he says: "Too late its beauty, lonely thing." The words "late" and "lonely" are stressed, causing us to automatically link the two words, and see that the flower is lonely because of its lateness. In the next line he describes the "season's shine" as being "spent." The first two words are soft, and convey the delicate softness of summer, whereas the word spent is harsh, and conveys the feeling that summer is completely over, and its harshness of sound emphasizes the harshness of winter. Alliteration is also used when he describes the flower as "shivering" in "tempests turbulent", giving us the impression of the strength and pressure exerted by the tempests. However, there would also appear to be irony here, since the pressure of a "tempest turbulent" would surely have more effect on a flower than just making it shiver. The ridiculousness of the image is used to stress the importance of the flower, by making it seem that the strongest forces of nature can only make it move slightly, thereby conveying the strength of the innate goodness or tenderness and sweetness which the flower possesses. Alliteration is also used when the poet asks whether the flower really thought that winter would "stay" its "stress". The slowing of the rhythm gives an impression of winter also slowing

down, and the harshness of the word "stress" conveys the harshness of winter.

Rhythm is also used extremely effectively when he describes the flower as rising when "leaves like corpses fall." The slowing down of the tempo, and the change in rhythm is used most effectively to give an impression that the leaves slowly waft to the ground. Again the feeling of death is apparent as it is when he describes winter as being the time of "plaintive robin-song", as if this song were one of mourning for the dead flowers.

The tone of the poem is one of sadness and gentle questioning. The poet is obviously saddened by the waste of the beauty of the flower on the harsh and devastated winter landscape, since something of so gentle and pleasing a disposition should not have to face up to the effects of winter. The gentle questioning is shown when he says, "Why should this flower delay so long" and also, "Why did it not uncurl?" The questions are not hard or harsh, but are merely gently reflective on the wonders of nature. And finally, we can see that in the poem the flower could symbolize God, and winter is "evil", in God's struggle to overcome it. This is shown when he describes the flower as being "one mask of many worn/By the Great Face behind," giving us the impression that the flower reflects God's infinite goodness in its beauty.

The poet, by his successful use of imagery, alliteration, rhythm, tempo and tone, is able to make the meaning of the poem clear, and also, I believe, to make the poem successful in its intention to show the greatness of God in the beauty of the flower, and to make the flower a symbol of God's fight against evil.

II

The first thing to be said is that the poem is a bad one, in fact a very bad one, yet neither boy had any sense of this. The second striking aspect of the exercise is that both boys show a considerable command of the discrete skills which can be effectively employed to help describe whether a poem is good or bad. Note that I say *can be effectively employed* since merely having these skills does not ensure their use to the end of proper discrimination.

In fact, they are discrete skills and not integral to appreciation of the goodness or badness of literature. I do not mean to suggest, incidentally, that these two boys possessed all these discrete skills, or that when identifying such details as personification, alliteration, or particular images they always used them well. But they seem to me to have a competence in this respect that is not inconsiderable for their age.

The poem is bad, however. It is sentimental, prosaic, turgid, superficial, jarring to the ear, a parade of technical devices with no content, and humorless. The last line is catastrophic in this latter respect, and indeed the poem might have been called The Great Behind. There are even possibilities here of analysis along anal lines.

But to return to more serious matters, the second student quoted above thought there was some metaphysical quality about the poem. I can see what he meant, although doubt that he knew either the Quarles or the Vaughan which suggested themselves faintly to me when I read his comment. But our student is not at all aware that this poet is not so much ingenuous as is Quarles (ingenuous like a Zen Buddhist), but is ingenuous only in consciously or unconsciously assuming naivety for sentimental effect. I am not denying that not all sixteen-year olds can make such an interpretation, since a sense of the rightness of feelings and attitudes may be unavailable to the relatively inexperienced. Yet the whole poem signals such weaknesses in perception and psychological inadequacies that young people who have been reading poetry intelligently for at least four years ought to be sensitive to them. Yet our two students do not. Why is that? I believe it is because a conscious association between prosodic-tropic analysis and the meaning of the poem-as-a-whole was not continuously made during the teaching of poetry, and concomitantly that poetry was probably not read simply for pleasure as often as studied in detail. I find it difficult to believe that either of these young men would take this poem as seriously as they seem to be doing here

if they were alone with their peers and stumbled across it. Surely they would reject it then both on the grounds of irrelevancy to their lives and as unmoving, as an aesthetic failure.

Doubtless this is part of the failure. That is, that they have been educated in such a way as to dissociate aesthetic response from deep feelings and thoughts they themselves might have (although not as yet necessarily do have) as persons. In conjunction with this notion they have got hold of the idea that skilled interpretation identifies rhetorical devices and then commends them irrespective of the kind, consistency and unity of the thought and feeling behind and within the poem. This is not to deny *any* use to the skill of being able to locate and describe the craft of words, the ideal function of literary devices. It is to say, however, that if intelligently evaluative response is not being made to the poem-as-unit as an expression of meaning by a man, then our teaching is missing out on the more important part of its job. Perhaps we should even set aside a percentage of marks - say ten percent - for correct identification of the better passage. This might provide the necessary motivation for both students and teachers to attend to the *quality* of the whole.

III

But I would like to tackle the problem at a somewhat deeper level than this one of incentive through reward. What ought the boys to have been doing, and how might they have been brought to the doing of it? Like many of the teachers who are reading this article, I have marked hundreds of scripts similar to the two cited above, and feel that this is the central problem of the literature teacher. If he or she fails to get better results than these scripts, then one of two futures are predictable for the students: either they are not going to do very much reading of literature at all for the rest of their lives; or they are going to read it in a vacuum of pretension where a certain kind of taste and a certain hollow form of appraisal are posited as the high-culture component of their lives. I am quite convinced in my own mind that this latter is the less desirable alternative of the two, because it is dishonest, misleading, and as D.H. Lawrence said, it does dirt on life.

But whichever of the alternatives is the outcome, the good teacher will not be satisfied. As I have indicated, the boys were making points about the poem in terms of memoried categories of rhetorical devices, with apparently no connection to the poem as human utterance *of a certain kind.* Note the attempts in **SCRIPT II** where we are told that the word "stress" is harsh, and is used to emphasize the harshness of winter. However, "stress" does not function in the poem as a harsh word. The giveaway is perhaps in a few lines further on where we are told that there must be irony in the poem since a tempest would surely do more than make a flower nod. We are told that the irony functions to enhance the prestige of the flower and illuminates its goodness. Where one has been told to expect irony one will find it – and justify it.

The students have failed, then, to respond to the piece of writing that confronted them as writing *of a certain kind,* as I remarked just above. Although appearing to respond to it as poetry, they did not respond to it on its own terms, they failed to pay it its due, to do it justice - and do themselves justice in the process. A poem is intentionally an artefact that by its claim to be a work of art/literature must qualify as that. Now art is significant communication or expression, is communication or expression that does justice to the nature of what is being expressed, and does justice to it in relation to a certain conception of man. This imposes certain qualities upon it: qualities of form, of honesty, of inclusiveness, of economy, of complexity. I think Professor Richard Hoggart of the Birmingham University Centre for

Contemporary Cultural Studies has put it well in a paper of his entitled *The Literary Imagination and the Study of Society* (Occasional Papers 3,1967):

> . . . a range and command of complexity in the writer adequate to this complex and wide-ranging subject, the study of men in society. [This is not to deny literature's function as the expression of a man; but it was not the Professor's subject at the time.] A range and a sense of complexity are not the same as a love of mass and complication. Second, a kind of economy or, in the mathematician's sense, elegance - a relevance or conformity between the treatment itself and the particular area under examination, a lack of hysteria (which can often be recognized in the writing itself, by the obsessive recurrence of certain themes or images), a lack of excess. Finally, a reasonable compatibility with findings from other disciplines; a compatibility with 'truth' found, with as much range, complexity and elegance, by different routes; the sense that each illuminates as well as mutually qualifies the others.

I think these categories of appreciation, or elements of a mode of appreciation, are acceptable ones, and I have already said why I think this is so in the case of the first two of Professor Hoggart's criteria. Possibly the third needs a comment, but it should not surprise us. After all, we demand of literature what Aristotle and hosts of others have referred to as verisimilitude, and we demand of it what these same critics call the 'typical' or the universal. We test a work of literature on our sense of its compatibility with the range and depth of our own experience of life, or of the culture's mediated experience. This is why, as I have stated, the young cannot always respond equally sensitively to all works of art that we put before them: they have not experienced enough to do them justice. Fortunately art moves at many levels to confront us with simulacra of our deepest selves and recognitions of the deepest selves of others, so that much art that would otherwise be lost to the young nevertheless appeals to them in some way or ways.

Art appeals to the audience, however, in its own terms; it *demands* of the audience. It does this by definition, and this in turn implies that it is an expression that can justly command such attention and intelligent submission. And this brings me to my final point. The poem with which these boys were confronted was a human expression that failed to fulfil reasonable criteria along the lines of Hoggart's and my own, and this should have been seen by the young appraisers of it. That they did not see it is testimony to their preoccupation with the mere forms of communication rather than with the literary essence. The literary essence was in this instance pusillanimous, sentimentalized, merely rhetorical.

What is the cure for this form of insensibility of the young critics? It can be nothing else but the making of it the central concern of the teacher of literature to communicate to his or her students a full sense of the crying need of each man to express his own meanings as a man, doing justice to the nature of man, and justice to his audience. A man speaking to men . . . , as Wordsworth and Jonson put it. The rhetoric of his expression is valuable only in so far as it is a function of his need to communicate himself with justice. Poems must speak to our condition as men and as individuals. That is the main point. But it is also fair to say that while this is being grasped, the sense of a poem being what Ortega y Gasset called *a form of words* that does justice to the meanings behind them must also be grasped. *A form of words:* this identifies the act of appreciation (and aesthetic response in general) as a mode of apprehension of and relation to literature that is unique and that has to be acquired or learned. ●